

# The year of living divisively: a Brexit polemic

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Recent blogs published by the CBS have tended toward a passive tone of reflection, seeking to objectively mitigate the emotive political and cultural crises caused by Brexit. Hopes for 2019 marking a more conciliatory tone have fallen short in under ten days, despite calls for a new period of Brexit 'Zen' on these very pages.

Since 2016, one underlying rhetoric often forgotten in the melee that is the Brexit debate has been the need for us to 'come together' and 'move on' in one direction as one country. I won't waste time unpicking the inherent contradiction in calls to 'move on together' when the destination remains ambiguous. Nor will I discuss how many insurgent's dissent may have been mitigated had they shown this same commitment to collaboration over the past 20 years. Instead, it seems pertinent to reflect on just how any state of 'zen' or reconciliation can be expected in such a divisive environment.

Often here the sanctity of democratic process is raised, the singularity and infallibility of any result sacrosanct. Comparing the current situation to, say, voting in a general election is a huge mistake. If an election delivers a government you disagree or become disillusioned with, we collectively have five years to reconvene a response. Brexit however marks a line in the sand from which there is little chance of return. Resistance is of course to be expected.

More relevant here is how any expectations of reconciliation can realistically be posed as things stand. Because whilst political and media hyperbole seek to maintain the clear divide between Leavers and Remainers, these reductions belie a more complex level of social, political and cultural fragmentation secreting an insidious resin which will bind us for decades.

Let's focus first on the economic argument. Whilst unswerving in my desire to remain in the EU, I don't buy into some economists' worst-case scenarios of 30% falls in house values, mass emigration of

whole industries, and the immediate need for stockpiling. As an economic geographer by trade, the ongoing quasi-religious status of the economist – who starts analysis with trade rather than place – is I will admit hugely irritating. Almost universal amongst economists is an opinion Brexit will negatively impact the economy, one of the founding principles here a place-linked ‘gravity’ effect. The almost sole dissenter is Brexiteers go-to expert, Patrick Minford. Even Minford’s analysis will make unwelcome reading for many leave voters, specifically those in the ‘places that don’t matter’[\[1\]](#), predicting the erosion of manufacturing and increased wage polarisation between skilled and unskilled workers[\[2\]](#). Add to this expected effects of automation on low skilled, easily immitable occupations, and the divisions and scope for counter-insurgency within the Leaver camp become explicit.

These divisions are similarly notable in the political sphere. Fragmentation within the two major parties in the UK (or should that be England – this is after all an English question) is nothing new. The scale of this fragmentation does fundamentally threaten the political landscape. Even without a largescale reconfiguration of parties, pitting a Soubry and Umunna-led *En Marche* against the polar-radicals of Corbyn and Rees-Mogg, the relatively unfluctuating nature of current polls might indicate that for the foreseeable future coalition or minority government is the new normal. This of course will do little to validate the efficiency of government.

Perhaps most significant however will be the enduring cultural divide the Brexit debacle represents. Despite the growing campaign for a 2<sup>nd</sup> referendum, this is not a scenario I see as capable of any clarity on the situation. This is not because allowing a final say on the issue is not democratic; it is fundamentally fair and appropriate to ask the question. But the figurative box is open. It illustrates a phenomenon too many are too obtuse to realise.

This geo-political tangent outlines the real differentiation between Leavers and Remainers; their ability to see the position of the nation-state in a shrinking world and therefore the role and necessity of supra-national governance. The resurgence of Nationalism across the globe is not indicative of an ideology reborn, but represents the strangled death knell of a belief bound singularly into the eroding notion of the nation-state. These concepts and borders embedded in

the consciousness of those aged over 40 are systematically dissolving in the minds of subsequent generations, partially through population mobility but also through communication advancements. Key value sets are instead shaped by specific aesthetic ideals defined on more localised notions of place. Thus, the value set of youthful, Europhile populations in London, Bristol, Manchester and Brighton have more in common with those of Paris, Amsterdam and Berlin than their neighbours in Thurrock, Gloucester, Burnley or Worthing.

We thus reach the unavoidable question; where does this leave us? In such an intractable position, resolution is difficult. We can re-run the vote forever and will never reach a clear mandate moving more than 55% in favour either way. Maybe conceding to an unsatisfactory halfway house is therefore justifiable, united in scorn of unconvincing compromise. Alternatively, we restructure the foundations of British society along the lines of China Mieville's "The City and the City"; existing in the same space but different states where Remainers retain EU privileges as Leavers gain their much-vaunted sovereignty. From my perspective, the divisive nature of the referendum is a long way from over. As we wind down a hundred-year period which has reduced the British Empire from almost a quarter of the world's population to a relatively modest island, maybe the question to ask is not that of the UK's future in the EU. It is of the future of the UK itself.

[1] Rodrigues-Pose, The revenge of the places that don't matter <https://voxeu.org/article/revenge-places-dont-matter>

[2] Sampson, Dhingra, Ottaviano and Van Reenen, Economists for Brexit: a critique <http://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/brexit06.pdf>